



When *Computer Shopper* was launched 20 years ago, Mel Croucher was there. And he's still here now, to help us celebrate two decades of computing milestones

Computer Shopper was launched with a belter of a manifesto on the first page of the first issue. It's why I joined up 20 years ago. It ran thus: "It is clear to us that computer magazines have become too bland and too concerned with keeping in with manufacturers. *Computer Shopper* is different. You'll read the truth about machines, not manufacturers' hype. We take one side: yours."

What a brilliant declaration. It got better as the manifesto went on: "We cover the subjects that unite computer users, whether you're a business or home user, a hacker or a computer professional." Ah, those were the days, when hacking was regarded as a positive community pastime and not an act of terrorism.

The man responsible for getting it all together was the launch editor, Graeme Kidd, who recalls, "The mission was best for price, best for advice. The plan was to get people who loved computing and who were not journalists right

there in among a wide team of freelancers. There was a charming aroma of smouldering anorak, but lots of good, solid technical material from people who knew their stuff. That was the gameplan from day one."

Graeme has gone on to a glittering career in politics and prize-winning sausages, but it was not always so. "For months I was the team," he says. "To get *Computer Shopper* off the ground, I trawled through my special contact book and unearthed an eclectic team, aided and abetted by Dennis staff, then off we went on a mission to deliver a computer magazine like nothing ever seen before."

And deliver we did, with support from staff such as our first news editor, Christina Erskine. She was the woman responsible for turning our contributions into a coherent production. Asked to describe what we achieved then, Christina says, "I think Dennis Publishing had the knack of accommodating maverick characters and



Up close and personal Mel Croucher

Mel Croucher started out as an architect. Luckily for us, during the 1970s he was side-tracked into the newly developing world of personal computing. He produced games and utilities, and pioneered multimedia guides. Mel's words appeared in *Shopper's* inaugural magazine, and have been entertaining readers ever since. Every issue, he enthuses or moans about something computer related in his *Rants & Raves* column. He also produces the Great Moments cartoon strip on the back page with artist Robin Grenville-Evans, whose artwork has appeared in every issue of *Shopper*. Robin created the main illustration gracing this very page.



getting great work out of them. We were all very clear that we were creating something recognisably different from the other magazines of the day, which were all business tomes or games mags, and I believe we succeeded."

So please raise your glasses and join me in thanking everyone involved. A very happy birthday to *Shopper*. It's been a privilege contributing to every issue of this wonderful magazine. Here's to the next 20 years!



1988-1992

The way we were

It all begins in a basement storeroom deep in the bowels of Dennis HQ in Rathbone Place, near Tottenham Court Road tube station. Here natural light is a stranger and sandwiches are flavoured with soldering flux. It feels like a mausoleum, which is appropriate because all the computers are the grey-beige colour favoured by Flemish artists when painting the dead.

A dedicated team of contributors submit articles on floppy disks sent in by snail-mail. Then they telephone to check that they have been delivered. Some of the more adventurous use a new-fangled FX-9600 fax machine to transmit illustrations at a few dozen dots per inch. The editorial team (both of them) put the magazine together on a shared Apple Mac.

The first *Computer Shopper* is printed on absorbent newsprint, with the sort of friendly ink that makes it impossible to use for toiletry purposes. A few pages boast spot colour in nursery shades, but most of the magazine overflows with monochrome words. Occasionally, an advertisement crowbars its way into the mix, offering such wonders as a 286 Ethernet Networking Starter Kit with two workstation cards, a cable and a 12-month guarantee, and all for a mere £2,995.

The magazine has dedicated sections for the Amstrad PCW, BBC/Archimedes, Commodore 64, MSX, QL, Sinclair Spectrum, Sinclair Z88, Macintosh and something known as 'PC and clones'. It is wrapped between eggshell-paper covers and stapled with the industrial-grade steel. By the end of the year, we are allowed to upgrade to proper binding and attend the first ever *Shopper* Show. We are lucky to get in. Over 3,000 hopefuls are turned away at the door.

It's early days yet, but we suspect we have something of a success on our hands. By issue number 33, we emblazon the words 'Britain's Biggest Selling Computer Magazine' on the cover. We've been there ever since.

1988-1992 THE MAIN EVENTS

Amstrad is the biggest-selling computer brand, and Alan Sugar begins to wear his head upside down without anyone noticing. Hewlett-Packard has just launched the Deskjet printer for a thousand dollars, printing one monochrome page every 30 seconds at 300dpi. The days of dot-matrix print are numbered. Three years later, colour cartridges get added to the mix, but the global practice of charging more for an ink cartridge than for the printer is yet to come.

Shopper reviews Creative's amazing Sound Blaster sound card. It is the first successful audio device for PCs. Up to now computers have been restricted to tweets and parps from puny internal speakers. Now they can get really irritating. This sort of multitasking is made possible only in April 1989, when the Intel 486 processor is introduced. Although this is not the first 32-bit chip we've got our hands on, it has the greatest impact and includes many of the features leading to the modern Pentium.

It marks a turning point in computing, which has always been software-driven with programmers pushing the boundaries of what their dumb machines can do. Suddenly software must catch up with hardware and, right on cue, in May 1990 Windows 3.0 arrives. Proud of its primitive graphical user interface, the operating system offers compatibility for hardware without the need for different drivers for each application. The mess that is Microsoft's operating system goes invisible, but MS-DOS still lurks in the background, ready to reboot the system as it crashes on the hour, every hour.



▲ Microsoft's first operating system with a graphical interface



Tim Berners-Lee comes up with an intriguing concept. He calls it the World Wide Web. As everyone's attention is distracted by this Windows thingy, the first faltering steps of the web are taken in line-mode, with users typing in an identification address for each hyperlink they want to follow. In 1991, we report the first web server to be set up. A year later, the Mosaic web browser lets the genie out of the bottle. Magic.

Visual Basic is released, and suddenly it's a whole lot simpler to create applications. Linus Torvalds liberates his Linux operating system, which is adopted by only seven lonely users. But his secure code works and is freely available to anyone, while Windows confirms that you can fool most of the people most of the time, and overcharge them for doing so.

A group of researchers at Cambridge University aim a video camera at a coffee percolator, and keep it bubbling until we report it as the first worldwide webcam hit. As the era ends, the legality of Microsoft's business practices falls under the examination of the US Federal Trade Commission. Surely this sort of unpleasantness will be resolved quickly?

Time lords Computing highlights remembered

SINCLAIR Z88

The Z88 costs £199.95 plus VAT and postage, weighs less than 2lb and is smaller than an A4 sheet of paper. With its rubber keys, a Zilog Z80 processor, 32K of memory, mono LCD display, built-in word processor, spreadsheet, calculator, calendar, clock and diary, it foreshadows all future PDAs. Sinclair boasts there is "no tape to break, no delicate disk to damage". It uses a solid state EPROM cartridge. It's brilliant, but it's also the beginning of the end of the wonderful Sinclair era.



1988

MACINTOSH CLASSIC

The Classic is the back-to-basics landmark from Apple, designed to rival the cheap PC compatibles hitting the market. It is a low-cost version of the SE model, still using the 8MHz 68000 processor, 1MB of memory, 9in screen and 40MB hard disk. The basic Classic has an empty space to mount an internal SCSI hard disk, is delivered with the 6.0.7 OS and sells for \$999 (around £495) in the US and whatever they can get away with in the UK.



1990

ATARI FALCON

This historic £299 flop is based on a Motorola 32-bit 68030 processor and has many powerful features including a fully bit-mapped colour user interface. However, performance suffers because the data bus is only 16-bit. The technical justification for this is to maintain compatibility with the popular Atari ST. It's a marketing mistake, especially as the planned 'micro-style' casing never leaves the drawing board. Atari ceases all desktop production the following year to concentrate on video games consoles.



1992



1993-1997 THE MAIN EVENTS

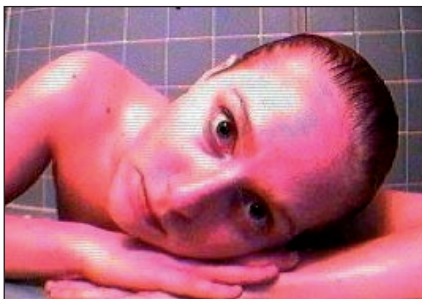
In December 1993, Doom is launched as a first-person, 3D shoot-'em-up game. By giving it away free as a cover mount, we contribute to the multiplayer revolution, encouraging folk to hook up multiple PCs and kill friends online. The following April, an American law firm sends out thousands of copies of an unsolicited green card lottery service to the UseNet newsgroup. Their idiocy is treated as bit of a joke until our in-boxes get clogged up with junk. Spam has arrived and there is no cure.

Anyone with 500 quid to spare in 1994 can snap up an Apple Quicktake 100. This is the first digital camera and it produces 640x480-pixel photos badly. But Kodak comes up with an amazing 6.2-megapixel single-lens reflex jobbie the following year. The only problem is it costs over eight grand without the lens.

Windows 95 is launched with MS-DOS bundled as a hybrid operating system. This kicks off the lunatic habit of junking hardware because it can't handle new software. When Apache open-source webserver software arrives, Bill Gates finally admits that the internet could become rather important, and force-feeds Internet Explorer 1.0 into Windows.

Hewlett-Packard breaks the \$1,000 barrier with the 4020 CD-R, a device for recording data on to CD-ROMs. Data must be written in a single pass on a one-time recordable disc, but they are cheap and tough and hold 400 times as much data as a 3½in floppy.

In April 1996, Jennifer Ringley installs a webcam in her college dorm room and lets it run



▲ Jennifer Ringley hooks up a webcam and bares all on the internet



continuously. The refresh rate is only once every three minutes but, with every detail of the young woman's life on display, it becomes the first opportunity to legally observe the sexual behaviour of a complete stranger.

We get our hands on the Voodoo 3D accelerator graphics card. It has 4MB of memory, costs £300 and gives us high-definition gore on our monitors. Within two years, graphics cards double in speed and impact.

The PalmPilot 1000 is launched as the first proper pocket computer, with dedicated keys for address book, appointments calendar, to-do list and memos. Microsoft hits back by launching its own operating system for the PDA market, Windows CE.

Mass piracy is unleashed in April 1997, thanks to Justin Frankel's Winamp MP3 software, and career opportunities are opened for scammers following the launch of web-based banking in the UK. As the era ends, Apple and Microsoft are entangled in litigation over who stole the look and feel of their operating systems from whom. Surely this sort of unpleasantness will be resolved quickly?

1993-1997

The way we were

We have emerged from the basement mausoleum and now inhabit a grand red brick edifice on Bolsover Street, with windows and air. This is definitely at the hub of things, with Great Portland Street on our doorstep and media-land all around. By now contributors are sending in their work via email, with just a few diehards still phoning up to see if their words have really arrived.

After various combinations of yellow, blue and red, our masthead on the front cover is set in friendly white capital letters. The magazine is now printed on the sort of razor sharp glossy paper that shareholders in Elastoplast drool over. Each issue is crammed with full-colour images. Advertisers are queuing up to parade their wares before our ever-increasing readership. Such is the demand for each new issue, newsagents shelves collapse under the weight and postmen suffer hernias as they assault our subscribers' letterboxes.

For Christmas 1994, we give away a free floppy containing two great games plus 16 screensavers. By the summer of 1995, we are cover-mounting CD-ROMs packed with the latest utilities and entertainment. We also set the trend of sticking booklets to our covers, ensuring that only the most sedate readers can collect a pristine set of magazines for their personal archive, while the rest of us rip the covers to shreds.

Computing is no longer the realm of enthusiasts and boffins. By now it affects the lives of everyone, every day. *Shopper* reflects this in each issue. The team grows at an amazing pace, and we boast a gaggle of editors, a herd of production staff, a shoal of labs workers and no fewer than two-dozen freelance contributors. Before our tenth birthday, we have absorbed three other magazine titles.

► One of Shopper's very first cover gifts



SIEMENS NIXDORF PCD

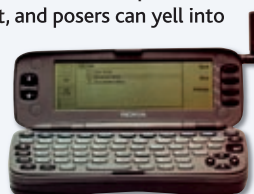
This is the first green computer. It is imported into the UK network-ready and costs a hefty £1,988. The machine is based around the Intel 80486SL processor and works with exceptionally low power consumption. The casing is made from two types of plastic, with each type claiming to bear clear identification marks for recycling. The computer conforms to the Energy Star green PC standard outlined by the US Administration, not yet adopted in the UK.



1993

NOKIA COMMUNICATOR 9000

The Communicator costs between £189 and £250, weighs 397g and is known affectionately as The Brick. Despite its bulk, fiddly keyboard and the slow and expensive data connectivity, it becomes an instant cult among the smart set. Sales staff can send and receive faxes, the self-employed have an office computer in their pocket at last, and posers can yell into it in public places while trying not to get the antenna stuck up their cocaine-dusted noses.



1996

DELL DIMENSION XPS

The US giant becomes the largest supplier of computers to the UK government. In 1997, Dell pioneers direct-selling via its UK website. The Dimension XPS with a 233MHz Pentium II processor has a starting price of £1,299 plus VAT. It has 32MB of memory, internal 512KB cache, 3.2GB hard disk, STB Nitro 3D GX graphics card, a 15in monitor, 24-speed CD ROM, integrated 16-bit sound, Microsoft Windows 95 and Office 97.



1997



1998-2002

The way we were

Our publicity material says that "Our office is slap bang in the heart of the West End. We're just a stone's throw away from Charlotte Street and its many bars and restaurants, five minutes from Oxford Street and Soho, and right in the hub of London's media land."

We're obviously even prouder of our new premises than we were of the last place. As the boss so eloquently puts it, "Dennis is like a family – we're a very sociable company – and you can feel it in the atmosphere the minute you walk through the door and see the fish tank. It continues right up through the modern, bright and vibrant offices where the majority of our magazines are made." That's the atmosphere and not the fish tank, of course.

As we laugh in the face of the phantom Millennium Bug, our aggressive shiny pages are replaced by yummy, silky paper that is altogether more eco-friendly and pleasant on the eyeball. To compensate, we beef up the packaging and our covers are now robust enough to withstand all the crystal-cased goodies we present to our readers. In the technical annexe, we have a group of dedicated disc editors who make sure that those 11 billion bits of free clip art really are essential.

Mobile computing allows us to contribute on the hoof, and contributors no longer feel the need to phone up and check if emails and attachments have arrived safely. It's a workplace revolution, not just for us but for the entire nation. The bulk of each issue is dominated by what we still call IBM compatibles, although we also feature four dedicated sections catering for Acorn, Amiga, Atari and Macintosh.

Our news and reviews now embrace a much wider range of products and services, as new buzzwords grab the public interest. DVDs, scanners, laptops, camcorders, flat-panel displays, wireless networks – it feels like the future has arrived.

1998-2002 THE MAIN EVENTS

It arrives in a glistening Shrek-green carapace, and breaks the mould of the boring beige box forever. The new £999 Apple iMac enthuses the most cynical PC aficionado about the way computers look as much as how they work, and the heresy is there's no floppy drive. No sooner have we been seduced by its charms than Apple enslaves us with wireless networking. The Apple AirPort router provokes PC users to demand the same privileges, and WiFi hotspots begin to invade airports, stations and cafés.

Windows 98 force-feeds Internet Explorer and networking into our lives in a bid to shut out other software companies from the market. The web has arrived on a mass scale. BT begins to roll out broadband, turbo-charging download speeds, getting us all so excited we fail to notice that it is charging us twice for using the same antique copper wires. The Handspring Visor kicks off the smartphone market with full PDA and mobile phone functions thanks to the VisorPhone add-on, which clips into the springboard slot in any Visor PDA.

The Rio PMP3000 becomes the first commercial MP3 player, liberating compressed audio files from our computer hard disks into our numb skulls. Intel's 333MHz Pentium II processor is faster and cooler than its forerunners – until the AMD K6-III clocks in at 400MHz, cramming 23 million transistors into its guts. Intel escalates the chip challenge with the Pentium III. Apple wades in by offering the PowerMac with a 500MHz option, the first personal computer capable of over one billion floating-point operations per second. AMD retaliates with the Athlon 750MHz, followed by a 1GHz chip. Stop! Stop! But, of course, it never stops.



▲ The Pentium II, super-fast at 333MHz



When Windows 2000 is launched, it is claimed to be more reliable than 95, 98 and NT. When Windows XP is launched, it is claimed to cure interminable compatibility problems, but that's because so much time has passed since the problems cropped up that most of the incompatible software is now obsolete.

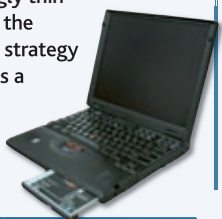
The success of Microsoft's Xbox is a genuine milestone, allowing internet connection for real-time multiplayer games. The fact it costs \$299 (around £150) in the US, and almost double that at £299 in the UK, seems unfair.

The new millennium heralds a spate of ludicrous law suits, including BT's claim to the rights to all hyperlinks, Amazon's claim to have patented one-click ordering, and Maz Technology's claim to own the patent for the encryption of any document. They are all laughed out of court. Meanwhile, Microsoft considers paying over a billion dollars to settle class action lawsuits brought by Californian residents, who claim the company has abused its market position and overcharged for its software. Surely this sort of unpleasantness will be resolved quickly?

Time lords Computing highlights remembered

IBM THINKPAD 600

The ThinkPad range comes in at less than £1,000 each as IBM ships its first Pentium II laptops into the UK. The 600s have a choice of 12.1in or 13.3in screens, they all have CD-ROM drives, and the top-end models have a high-capacity 8.1GB hard disk option. The machine is amazingly thin and light, and aimed at the corporate market. It's a strategy that works, as IBM takes a lead over all other laptop makers with 47 per cent of the market share.



1998

APPLE IBOOK

At a launch price of £1,099 including VAT, this could be the most luxurious plastic lunch box ever. In a range of eye-popping colours, the tough case has a built-in carrying handle, and there are no vulnerable latches or covers for the USB, Ethernet or modem ports. What makes the iBook special is the fact that it's the first portable to have internal wireless networking as well as an optical drive. It can be used as a toilet seat, too.



1999

BLACKBERRY 950

Launched two years earlier in the US, it's dubbed the 'crack-berry' because users become addicted so fast. When it's launched in the UK by MM02 (formerly BT Cellnet), it is available only to businesses, and it costs at least £400 a handset. Even so, there is an immediate waiting list of hopefuls. No logging in, no phone line, no web terminal – just a little black box in your pocket that provides instant email anywhere, any time. It is revolutionary.



2001



2003-PRESENT THE MAIN EVENTS

The everyday use of computers in the home and the workplace becomes a continual battle against malicious viruses, spam, Trojans, scams, spyware and identity theft. The Sandy worm exploits search queries to infiltrate 40,000 websites and turn them into sources of infection. Ten million computers are body-snatched by the insidious Storm Botnet and dragooned into slavery for purposes too scary to imagine. MyDoom sets the record for the fastest spreading mass-mailer worm, and it causes over £20 billion of damage in 215 countries.

In the UK, 16 million households have internet access, of which 85 per cent are using broadband connections. Two hundred million people worldwide use eBay to sell their old junk to one another, using electronic cash that governments cannot monitor or tax. Social networking websites allow anyone to upload mass trivia and download more of the same. The global leader is MySpace, claiming over 300 million members and accounting for around 10 per cent of global web time. It is bought by Rupert Murdoch. Another breathtaking growth is the Google search engine. Its corporate slogan is Don't Be Evil; just as well, as it is used by over 80 per cent of the world's internet population.

Computer power continues to increase exponentially as the high street cost continues to fall. Apple still bucks the trend by wrapping its kit in designer packages and charging more. Its UK iPhone deal costs an extortionate £899, yet it makes headline news as punters queue round the block. Sadly, there are fewer headlines as the extraordinary XO-1 clockwork computer goes into mass production. Running at 433MHz,

► The XO-1 is the world's first fully functioning clockwork computer



consuming only 2W of power, WiFi enabled and running open-source software, it costs less than a hundred quid and is given free to children in the developing world.

AMD ships its first dual-core 64-bit desktop processor. Intel introduces the Core 2 processor, as it announces plans for an 80-core processor that will deliver more than one teraflop. The Sony PlayStation has 20 times more processing power than the Apollo moonlander and a hundred times more memory than an Apple Classic. The personal details of 25 million UK citizens can be recorded on two CD-ROMs and then lost in the post.

The Mozilla Firefox web browser becomes the biggest competitor to Internet Explorer, possibly because it works brilliantly. Windows Vista is launched more than five years after the last major new operating system from Microsoft Corporation, as the European Court fines Microsoft a record £350million for abusing its dominant position. The European

Commissioner predicts a glut of new cases against the software giant, but surely this sort of unpleasantness will be resolved quickly? **CS**

2003-present

The way we are

DVDs adorn our covers. Our *News* digest is a one-stop resource for in-depth stories. *What's New* is the UK's ultimate resource for reviews and ratings. The results of our *Labs* reports are second to none. Our *Help* files deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation. The *Learn* section is what I'd like to have had when I was starting out, and I'm happy to admit I'm still learning. Our features are still as eclectic as ever. As for the section called *Favourites*, it was ever thus. These days I submit work by electronic telepathy from wherever I happen to be on the planet. When I think of what a struggle it used to be I'm not sure whether to laugh or weep. On reflection, I have to laugh.

We have about 40 members of staff and 20 freelance contributors, all working for you, the reader. I'd like to say we've come a long way from that basement mausoleum in London where *Shopper* was hatched, but actually we have come about half a mile. Mission Control is up on the fifth floor of the palatial Dennis Publishing headquarters in Cleveland Street, topped by Regents Park and tailed by Soho.

The last time I wandered in, the lady at reception smiled and asked who I was and what I wanted. When I confided that I'd been writing for the magazine for 20 years and was popping in to steal some PCs, she gave me a look normally reserved for accident and emergency. I realised she had not been born when all this began. For her it's always been the computer age and *Shopper* has always been the nation's favourite computer magazine. Now there's a sobering thought.



▲ The home of Britain's best computer mag

HP IPAQ POCKET PC H5450

This is the ultimate executive toy for £649 including VAT. It is a genuine milestone in portable computing, with a 400MHz processor and a TFT screen that is amazingly bright and clear. It includes Bluetooth, infrared and WiFi, as well as SD and CompactFlash card slots to augment the 64MB of onboard memory. The 128-bit security and fingerprint recognition attest to the current atmosphere of paranoia. The simplest delight, and best feature of all, is a user-replaceable battery.



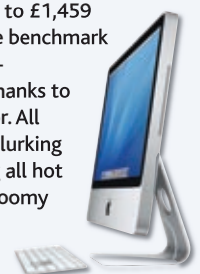
SONY VAIO TX

This astonishing machine redefines the laptop. The Vaio TX is built from carbon fibre that's twice as strong, a third lighter and four times more rigid than normal plastics. It contains the most advanced technology ever to appear in a feather-weight ultra-portable. The XBrite display is stunning and the machine packs WiFi or wireless networking alongside a full entertainment suite into its anorexic profile. It's priced at £1,498 plus VAT, and it is worth every penny.



APPLE IMAC

This all-new iMac is a slender thing of beauty, crafted from aluminium and glass. It houses processor, widescreen monitor, video camera, audio and total connectivity inside a single unit. Costing from £799 to £1,459 including VAT, it sets the benchmark for style and is the best-performing Apple yet, thanks to its Intel Core 2 processor. All those other computers, lurking under desks and getting all hot and bothered in their gloomy coffins, seem very old-fashioned indeed.



2003

2005

2007